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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [JO](#)
SUBJECT: JORDANIAN MEDIA ENDS RETALIATORY BOYCOTT OF
PARLIAMENT

REF: A. AMMAN 1404
[B](#). AMMAN 1393

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Newspapers ended a short-lived boycott of parliamentary sessions but maintained their criticism of the legislature in the wake of the lower house's rejection of a bill which would have lifted a tax on media revenues (Ref B). The government has forwarded the bill to the royally appointed Senate in the hopes that a compromise may be found, but lower house deputies are standing by their rejection of the bill. The incident may signal the rejection of more significant government-drafted bills by the lower house in weeks to come. End Summary.

Short-Lived Media Boycott of Lower House

[1](#)2. (SBU) Four major daily newspapers (Al-Ghad, Al-Arab Al-Yawm, Al-Rai, Al-Dustour) announced on June 18 that they would boycott parliament's extraordinary session in solidarity with the Jordan Press Association's (JPA) condemnation of "the unprecedented accusatory language used by several MPs against journalists." Media outlets went further on June 19, setting up an online poll where newspaper readers were asked: "Do you support the continuation of the current Lower House?" Of the 184,340 votes tallied by June 24, ninety-five percent of respondents answered no -- a result which media outlets then featured prominently. The online survey is yet another jab at deputies who earlier complained about overly extensive coverage of previous poll results indicating low approval ratings for parliament (Refs A and B).

[1](#)3. (SBU) Senior figures in parliament attempted to bridge the gap between the media and parliament by appealing for decorum on both sides. Lower House Speaker Abdulhadi Al-Majali returned early from a trip to the United Arab Emirates, although he has made no public statement on the matter. Senate President Zeid Al-Refai and prominent MP Abdulkarim Al-Dughmi met separately with editors and the JPA in an effort to end the boycott.

[1](#)4. (SBU) On June 23, the four dailies and the JPA formally resumed coverage, saying that "the public has a right to be informed" regardless of ongoing tensions between the media and parliament. The media continues to prominently feature stories and commentary critical of the lower house and the JPA is reportedly considering the possibility of legal action against MPs who accused the media of politically motivated targeting. On June 24, one columnist suggested that MPs abandon various perks (such as customs exemptions and access to hajj visas) in order improve the parliament's public image.

Culture Tax Bill Hangs In The Balance

¶5. (U) Meanwhile, the government has moved the bill to repeal the culture tax to the royally appointed Senate. If approved by the Senate, the bill would return to the lower house for reconsideration. Senators are suggesting that the bill may be amended to reduce the media tax to one percent from the current five percent rate to essentially split the difference between the demands of the lower house and the media.

¶6. (C) Lower house deputies tell us that the compromise won't work and insist that they will reject the bill again, even if it returns from the Senate in another form. Many MPs believe that Senators are pandering to the media in the hopes of receiving positive coverage. Some point out that the revenues from the tax are supposed to support youth centers which have no other source of funding and that lower house MPs are looking to compel the government to begin collecting the tax in order to support a worthy cause.

Comment

¶7. (S/NF) The hype over the culture tax and subsequent media boycott threatens to obscure the fact that a significant policy debate is happening within parliament. MPs are starting to challenge government policy on a political level -- a development noted by both the media and government ministers. Significant bills such as the tax law and social security reform were previously expected to pass through the legislature without debate or amendment. Now these measures are looking more vulnerable as MPs assert their authority and willingness to use it. At the end of the day, however,

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parliament will only be able to meaningfully increase its influence over national policy when its membership is comprised of more skilled and organized legislators.
Beecroft